

Road Not Taken by Dreamer1214

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Dustin Henderson/Maxine "Max" Mayfield

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-04-01

Updated: 2021-04-04

Packaged: 2022-04-01 01:54:05

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 3

Words: 3,556

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Two years ago Max Mayfield's world once again bottomed out. Following an event that took place she lost control of everything she thought she knew. Coming back to Hawkins to be there for not only her boys, but the one she left behind may be worse than /that/ night, might even be worse than the night she lost her brother. There's a lot she needs to clean up, a lot that she's not sure how to handle. The only thing Max knows for sure is that Dustin needs her, that she needs to repair the damage that was done to the party ...the damage that was done to herself. Running away has never been the answer, even if it's what she knows best. (Set in current time rather than the 80s. Completely AU with some show pulling)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

First of all before anything else I'd like to throw a trigger warning on this. Sexual assault is a prominent factor within this story. I'm not looking to offend anyone or dig into any wounds so if this is something that triggers you then I ask you to kindly leave this right now. Don't read any further. I mean absolutely no disrespect and I really do hope that you're working through your trauma. My heart is completely with you.

With that out of the way the second but of business that I'd like to address is that this story is not set in the 80s. It's set current day (so it's partly AU. the events of the Upside Down have still taken place in the past. It's the trauma that's brought them all together). Again, if this is an issue please don't read further.

With that said, our party is roughly 20 when this takes place? Well, parts of it. There will be chapters that are flashbacks. They will all being labeled accordingly with timing and where they fall in our timeline.

Again, if you're reading this and you enjoy it, drop me a comment, pull out the things you like most, whatever you remember from it, where you think it's going. That kind of feedback is something I thrive on. It's highly appreciated. I love writing this version of Max and it's sort of become something of my own.

With that being said, thanks for checking it out! A appreciate you getting through my bullshit here.

“Ain’t that one of the boys you used to get on your knees for?”
the urge to tell Neil to fuck himself was on the tip of her tongue. In

fact, as the words were muttered out she felt her teeth clench against the inside harder than she meant. The taste of copper filled her mouth slowly.

The distraction was almost welcoming.

Turning her head to the side she spat a small amount of spit and blood into the grass, quickly watching it absorbed into the dry ground. **“Maxine”** Susan’s look was one of disapproval. As if the woman could actually be disappointed in the actions of a daughter that she hardly knew. It was funny who a person turned into when their parents checked out of the whole parenting game.

There was regret swirling in the pit of her stomach. Why exactly had curiosity gotten the best of her and dragged her back to Hawkins after nearly four years of playing hooky? She’d been better off in California --at least that was what she’d lied to herself on the plane. That California had been her saviour.

The truth was there was nothing that could have saved her and that was a fact that Max had come to terms with years ago. She’d been broken long before the events of senior year had brought themselves into the fold too. She couldn’t even blame what had happened then for the mess that she was. Instead, what she could do was adjust the saint christopher pendant that hung against her breast bone and tuck on a fake cheery smile, **“sorry mom”** the word tasted like acid.

Curiously, Max finally looked over in the direction Neil had been talking in. It was only then that a smile finally cracked through her stone facade. Sure enough, facing one of the christmas trees on the lot was the familiar silhouette she recognized even now. She took her cue to walk away from her mother and stepfather and over to the man inspecting the christmas tree. **“Shitbag, you’re the only one who would scrutinize if the tree was even a half diameter off. Buy it and suck it the fuck up.”** Max mouthed off, pulling her jean jacket closer around her body as the couple pivoted in their spots.

His jaw was tighter than it had been, his stern face resembling his father’s. Yet the moment his eyes fell on her the facade cracked. A smile spread across cold features, **“well well well, if it isn’t my favorite slut. What blew the trailer trash back out this way?”**

Lisa's hand was dropped, Max was dished a questioning look, permission for a beat, before his arms were wrapping around her in a bone crushing hug.

He was the first to step back, looking her up and down... inspecting. **"You look good Max."** it was high praise coming from the man who dished insults like they were candy. **"You... got my text, didn't you?"** how exactly he'd stalked her publicist enough to give out the information was beyond her, but nonetheless she was almost grateful for it.

Claudia being sick had been the last thing she'd expected to hear from him. Well, sick would have been one thing. Dying was another completely. Max hesitated a moment, her fingers ripping into the corner of her v-neck and etching a line against the star tattoo carved into her collarbone. **"...yeah"** she hadn't settled with it herself yet. The information was more than she could swallow.

"How is he?" Lucas didn't even have to answer her for her to know that she'd just asked a loaded question. Yet for some reason the syllables had crawled out of her throat and demanded to be said. Silently she cursed herself for it. **"I know... it's a stupid question."**

Max felt herself growing mildly over conscious of the fact that Lisa's eyes were on her. Sure, Lucas and Lisa had been together since high school. It didn't mean that Lisa tolerated her anymore than just for Lucas's sake. She'd always been bothered by the way Max was one of the boys where she had to sit things out more often than not. No one seemed to understand that a girl could be included in the boy's plans. That was the sexist thing about life for you.

Lucas cleared his throat, pulling her attention from her thoughts as he nudged his head to the side making her look. **"Doctor Johnson is Claudia's doctor. He and his wife have owned this tree farm since we were kids. He helps out a couple times a week so that they didn't have to hire an additional hand."**

She should have seen him.

His hair was longer, his shoulders broader, his smile still wrapped in his features even if they didn't quite reach his eyes the way they used

to. Had she actually been more alert of her surroundings there wasn't a way she wouldn't have seen him the moment they'd stepped onto the tree lot.

It took all of her strength not to run over to him, to wrap herself up in him and apologize for her leaving, for not being there when he needed her ...for all of it.

“I think the best medicine possible for him is standing right in front of me now.” Lucas offered and she looked back at him with a forced smile. His words probably weren't corrent. Not with the way that she hadn't been there, the way that she'd just taken off.

Sure, they were extenuating circumstances that had made her crack - and he'd known about majority of them. But it was still the fact that she'd left to go through it on her own when she could have stayed and gotten help with it all.

The past was the past now. The only thing Max could actually do was to offer him her being there in the moment ...if she could find her guts to go over and tell him that she was home. That whole notion seemed almost as impossible as the events that had taken place at the end of senior year.

“Max, go.”

2. the ache in you.

Notes for the Chapter:

WOAH. someone who isn't one of those that I nag with this story is following it? Hi there. welcome to my bubble. This is my happy place and I'm happy to have you! Thanks for the read! I hope that you enjoy this chapter. <3

This was honestly the first part of this whole story/continuity written. Before the whole story had fleshed itself out in front of me.

There are pieces in this chapter that are a little messy now with where the story goes. But I love it too much to give anything more away about why. Things are going to start getting very dark with flashbacks soon, spelling out why Max ran, and even before that, how calm and just /good/ things were. Let me tell you, with the amount of stuff I've put Max through, muse should hate me.

Anyway!

again, I'd love to hear comments if you have any.
please enjoy this messy bit of chaos.

OH! and before I completely forget - Tis the Damn Season by Taylor Swift.
just do it.

The silence between them was echoing.

What else could she really have expected? She deserved his anger, but considering who he was she knew it wouldn't come. Instead, she'd just sit there and feel the heaviness of the moment. Reminders of what she'd done to him. If she was being completely honest, it was even worse. She would have preferred him to scream and get his anger out.

Blue eyes lingered outside on the snow covered ground. **“Carmen’s back.”** She really didn’t need to know that. The girl who’d always had the biggest crush on him through school. The one that she’d accidentally fucked over more times than she could count. Stomping on any chance that the girl had when it came to her massive crush on Henderson. **“oh”** her response wasn’t coated in curiosity. It was simply just a statement. **“Her father passed a couple of months ago. She’s grown up.”** Again, Max didn’t care.

She knew Dustin well enough to know that he wasn’t even trying to make her jealous. He was simply informing her of what had been up in the years that she’d been gone.

Yet there was a part of Max that felt her jaw clench.

Silence once again settled between them in the cab of the truck. A truck. Who would have ever thought that Dustin would have bought an actual pick up truck? The whole thing just seemed... weird. But she supposed that was what happened when during the first year of college your mom got sick and the responsibility was left on your own shoulders to take care of.

She still felt guilty for that.

“Are you staying with Susan and Neil?” home or whatever. Where else was she supposed to stay?

“Yeah” the response was quiet.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see the lot where the old mall had once stood and she felt a flair of sadness that she had to work a little harder than most to push down. The fence looked dilapidated and worn. It was as if no one had touched the site since they were 14 years old. Not that she was surprised.

Maybe she should have stayed.

“And he’s been... alright?” Neil.

“He hasn’t laid a hand on me. Mouths still as crass as always.” He’d commented on her lack of college the moment she’d walked in, doing his best to make her feel small. It hadn’t worked in his favor this time.

“Susan told me she’s missed you. Not that that matters. She should have missed you six years ago.” A bitter smile pulled at her features for a moment. D was usually right.

He stared the car to the quiet intersection and stopped as the yellow light turned red, **“you didn’t come home when Mike proposed.”** The first year after they’d graduated. El had voiced her suspicion. Max had known what the response was going to be.

“She was never going to say yes. We’re just kids.”It may have been the first time she’d ever heard a bitter laugh come from him.

It was a sound that she deserved.

She could see it clear as day in her head. The day that she’d decided she was done, that she couldn’t have handled another moment in Hawkins. They’d been two weeks from graduating. Prom had been the day before and everything had been a whirlwind. She’d let him in, let him kiss her in front of all of their friends, she’d given him ... hope.

Then in true Max fashion, she’d let everything crash down around them.

“It crushed him.” The far away tone to his voice gave away to Max that he wasn’t talking only about Mike for the moment. Because she knew, she knew that she’d crushed him just as El had done to Mike by turning down that proposal.

Besides, with what had happened senior year she knew that things between himself and Mike weren't great. No matter how badly she'd begged for it not to hinder their friendship. She also knew that she and El were another story all together. Something he too knew.

Once again there was silence, thick and overwhelming as the light changed and he pulled the car down one of the side roads that was covered with a worn blanket of snow that made the Christmas lights pop against the perfect houses. **“You know... mom would love to see you.”** Claudia Henderson. Last Lucas had given an update Claudia had weeks left at best. Hospice care was there around the clock so that Dustin wasn’t shouldering it all on his own.

There it was again, that silence. The silence as the Christmas lights glistened.

“Come home Max. I don’t... I don’t mean home home. Just home. For the weekend. Stay with me. I would never ask you to come home, not to stay... just... for the weekend.” There it was, the mumbling, the talking too fast for his own good. One of the things that she’d fallen in love with the most when it came to Dustin. **“I know you don’t want to be with Neil and Susan.”** He always knew, always knew what she wasn’t saying. Perhaps it was because they’d spent so much time together for those four years. Always every waking moment from 14 to 18.

She knew he could tell what she wasn’t saying.

He could see that there was a part of her that regretted leaving. That wondered what it would have been like if she’d stayed in Hawkins. If she’d been less selfish and helped him look after Claudia. Waking up beside him every day. Would she have had a ring on her finger by now? Probably. Would they have been talking about expectancies? Most likely. Because what else did you do stuck in one small shit town for the rest of your life?

It had been her fears then.

Now? Now she wondered what that would have been like. To, at twenty, be settled down and moving into a comfortable life. Would they have been happy? Could she have been?

Part of her had no doubt that they would have been. He would have made sure of it.

“Just the weekend Max” he’d pulled the car over, by the little farm that always went all out with their Christmas décor for the holidays. They hadn’t let the town down this year, the array of lights made for an echoing and cheery backdrop on their dismal scene. **“I miss you”** his words were worn out and tired sounding, genuine.

She’d missed genuine things.

His hand was out, laying palm up in the center of the barrier between them. Her tired eyes looked from his face to his hand a couple of times before she made her decision, before her small hand slid into his. Fingers fitting right between the creases like a puzzle that she’d forgotten how to finish and complete in the two years since they’d graduated from high school.

It was in that moment that Max, for the first time in years, felt like she could breathe.

“Just the weekend.”

3. always leads to you

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey there!

not sure if anyone else is actually reading this. (Other than my favorites. I know, I'm a pain, I'm sorry) But if you are, I hope you're intrigued by this whole thing. I'm dying to get to the point of the flashbacks coming in to show you how we got here. Where exactly this relationship of sorts blossomed and came from.

Anyway! I hope everyone has a great bunny day.

<3

As always. If you're someone glancing this over please feel free to leave your thoughts and comments. Tell me what you like, what you don't like, where you think it's going and what happened before this point. I'm interested to see your theories!

Willing herself to go in the house had yet to happen. Instead, Max had pulled the lighter that had at one point belonged to her older brother from her pocket and flicked it to life a couple of times. The cold Indiana chill compiled with the shake in her hands had blown it out before she could reach the cigarette between her chapped lips.

This was overwhelming.

It was bad enough that she was home. A place that she hadn't been since she was 18. Four years had passed since she'd been in Hawkins. Four long years of changes and bends in what had once been. They weren't the kids who had gotten themselves wrapped in the supernatural. Those days were behind them for the most part, they had shaped the adults that they had all grown into, sure. Had shaped the weird succession of the places life had brought them all to.

Mike had a band he toured with, Lucas was an accountant, Will was lucky he'd gotten to 21, El was... who knew, and Dustin was right where she'd never expected him to be.

Claudia was dying. Actively dying. Right inside of the house in back of her the woman who'd turned into the closest thing to a mother that Max had ever accepted. Dustin's mother wavered in and out of consciousness. Death might have been a concept that Max was familiar with and not having a parent there to provide support might have also been something she knew all too well, but this was different. Claudia had been good to her even when she hadn't deserved it. Claudia was a woman she'd grown to respect more than she'd ever respected her own.

Max took a long inhale of the stick between her fingers. The nicotine coated her lungs for a moment as blue eyes fell shut and she allowed herself to feel the cold winter air. Yet the cold that stuck in her bones was not the same as it was in California. California had put an ache in her that had filled the second she'd seen him, he'd repaired her broken pieces with that lopsided smile.

How was it that that was all it took?

"You're going to catch your death out here." his voice came from in back of her as the screen door opened with a clatter. She felt his pause for a moment and then the rambling began, **"that was a poor choice of words. I mean, I know... this is all new to you. It's overwhelming, I'm sorry."** why the hell he was apologizing she wasn't sure. It was his mother that was in the house on her deathbed. The hospital had been brought to his home, and in pure Henderson fashion, he was trying to make her comfortable.

Her head shook, the red under her beanie fluttering into her eyes for a moment, **"D... don't."** he needed her to step up and be there for him for once, not the other way around. Even if she wasn't very good at it.

"Come here" before any rebuttal or protest could be made she felt the old cardigan being wrapped around her shoulders. He was always far better to her than she felt like she deserved. She knew that

nothing she said would have deterred him from it either. **“I’ve had my time to settle with this. You haven’t. For once Max, you don’t get to tell me how it is here.”** his words made her take another pull from the cigarette in her hand.

He was right.

“I should have been here” words were quiet, she was speaking things that she should have said years ago when she’d first been told by Lucas that things weren’t going to get better. **“For her”** that wasn’t all of it, as he walked in front of her and met her eyes she whispered out the rest of it, not finding the strength enough to find her voice, **“...for you.”**

The cigarette was dropped, crushed under his shoe and she made a note to pick up the filter later, quirks of being teens who hid their smoking habits meant always cleaning up the evidence. His hand was on the back of her neck, warm fingers against cold flesh, **“Stop it Max”** always the one to know her truths, even when she hesitated with saying them. She’d never been able to lie to him with a straight face without him calling her shit. **“You followed what you needed to do.”** he wasn’t wrong.

She’d put space between herself and everything that had happened in her history. She’d retraced her steps home to the beach and dumped her brother’s ashes into the pacific ocean, right in the little cove where they’d grown up. Paintings had bloomed, photos had etched her life with memories, sketching had turned into more than just a vice that she did on the corners of her papers.

Leaving Hawkins had made Max find herself.

It also didn’t mean that she hadn’t wanted him with her for all of it, didn’t mean that she’d gotten over the fact that every breath she took felt weighed down by the lack of Dustin there to ease her through it all. With a love so golden it was hard to function and move past it. Hard to know that back in Hawkins he was being emotionally torn apart while she surfed and lingered in the blinding sun.

“You were stuck here” he had been. They’d all left at one point or

another and Dustin had taken care of Claudia. He'd remained in Hawkins even when they'd all put money down on him being the one to get out and to create all of those big dreams that he missed so much. **"I should have come home"**

They were somewhere between lies and the truth.

"You would have ended up hating me." she was pretty sure that wouldn't have been an option. Hating Dustin sounded like some vile lie that colored her in a shade of red anger. **"Don't give me that look Max"** it was like an intrusion when he did it, reading her without her even saying a damn word. **"Days were dark. Things I've said to her... things I've done. It was tough for a while Max. Really tough."** sure, maybe she hadn't had to watch Billy die slowly, but she could remember what she'd been like in the fallout of that.

She would have stood by him, they both knew that. Even if he was trying to make her feel better.

"Stay here tonight Sunshine. Don't go back to Neil's while you're here this weekend." she wasn't sure when she'd started it, but she could feel the moisture slipping down her cheeks. Crying was one she didn't do, one she didn't allow herself to do. Yet as he stood with his forehead bent against hers, his warm breath against her nose, she could feel the tears falling.

It was safe here. Safe to cry and safe to feel.

A moment later her lips were against his and she couldn't quite recall who had begun it or where it would end. But her back was pressed against the vinyl siding of the house and for the first time in four years she didn't feel like there were broken pieces sticking out of every inch of her.

Their lives were a mess. They had more to talk about than either one of them had the time or the emotional wingspan to admit. But for a moment, just a single fragmented moment, it all felt like maybe there was a little bit of hope in her bones. Because as the kiss went on she could feel all of the bruises, cuts, and scraps that were lingering under her skin beginning to heal.

It wasn't a surprise to her. Dustin had always been the one to level her off and fix her.

...now all she had to do was figure out how to find the courage to make it inside of the house.